

Creating Urban Centers That Work.

Most people in our community have agreed that growth management is a good idea. No one wants to see the sea of single-story development and asphalt continue to flow ever outwards from our cities, devouring more and more of our beautiful countryside. Yet this is at odds with our needs for places to live, work and play. Since the Growth Management Act was passed by the Washington Legislature in 1990 the central Puget Sound has been successful in gradually restricting growth on the perimeter of our urban areas, but it has been ineffective in helping Cities allow for the growth in the urban areas necessary to keep the costs of housing and commercial development at affordable levels.

Our leaders and our communities have largely come to recognize that in order to reconcile these disparate needs, we need to fully utilize our Urban Centers. We need more densely developed centers that are attractive to live in and vibrant to patronize.

The City of Seattle presently has five Urban Centers designated under its Comprehensive Plan (first adopted in 1994 and due for its 10-year update at the end of the year by the Seattle City Council). They are: Capitol Hill/First Hill, Uptown (Lower Queen Anne), Downtown, Northgate and the University District. A sixth urban center will most likely be designated this year with South Lake Union. While each of these neighborhoods has its own unique personality, most have fallen short of fully becoming a true “urban center”. We now have more than half of our six Urban Centers that are struggling to overcome years of neglect from the city. Our goals for our communities have been thwarted by a cumbersome zoning code and other land use regulations which, at approximately 1500 pages long, are very complicated and difficult document for neighborhoods, property owners, developers, and City staff to use and administer. Additionally, the Northgate, Urban Center, is the only neighborhood out of 38 in the City of Seattle that hasn’t had its neighborhood plan updated since the Comprehensive Plan was first adopted.

Recently, our mayor announced zoning and Land Use Code changes intended to help revitalize both the Broadway area of Capitol Hill and the University District. In the last several years the mayor has also announced efforts to enhance Northgate and South Lake Union. While his intentions are worthy, these minor changes are not enough to turn these neighborhoods into what we need them to become. We need to look at all of our Urban

Centers with new eyes, and differently than we do the other parts of our city. Presently the Urban Centers in the City of Seattle are subject to the same lengthy and complicated Land Use Code that the other Seattle neighborhoods are. The existing Seattle Land Use Code was created in various stages from 1979 through the 1980's. and has been amended so many times since that it is confusing and difficult to understand. It is now time for a new Land Use Code specifically for the Urban Centers be created to free those Centers from the constraints of difficult regulations and allow them to prosper. The new code should be short and simple, such as Tacoma's 12 page zoning code. It should describe what our City's vision is in each Urban Centers. A new code will allow the creative architects and developers in our City to seek new ways to accomplish the goals of growth management. Design Review and Design Guidelines would still be available to help projects fit in with the context of each Center and create dialog with our neighborhoods. Without this change to a new code the Urban Centers will be continue to struggle with codes that were created during a different era and for historical reasons that no longer apply.

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Urban Centers Model Code

Over-Arching Objectives

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1. Simplicity

The regulations should be concise and readable.

2. User-Friendliness

The regulations should be easy to apply and administer.

3. Reflect Public Policy

The regulations should create relatively intense but livable, mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented urban places.

4. Adaptability

The regulations should lend themselves to being modified to fit different types of urban centers.

5. Flexibility

The regulations should allow for many different results, so long as desired quality and character is achieved.

6. Predictability

The general intensity, height and form of development that is expected should be readily apparent.

7. Simplify Environmental Review

Exemption level for urban centers should be increased.

Principles

1. Keep quantitative standards to a minimum

Regulations should focus a small number of key subjects with numerical dimensions and standards.

2. Use simple tables rather than lengthy text

Tables should be able to convey major elements, with footnotes as needed to clarify or qualify.

3. Use graphics and illustrations

Diagrams, sections and photographs can help explain elements of the regulations – particularly design guidelines.

4. Emphasize plain English

Define terms when commonly words are not sufficient.

5. Develop a basic, simplified code

The code should address allowable intensity, height, incentives and other objective issues.

6. Develop separate design guidelines

A supplemental document should describe design expectations.

7. Allow for alternative solutions

Creativity should be encouraged with respect to meeting the intent of design guidelines.

8. Offer incentives

Additional intensity should be granted in exchange for providing specified features.

9. Relate standards to other public objectives

Example: reduce parking requirements to encourage transit/HOV use

10. Encourage wide mixture of uses

Avoid long lists of permitted, special and conditional uses

11. Make more effective use of parking

Encourage shared parking and off-site parking supply.

12. Recognize height as a sensitive issue

Building heights might increase in some locations over time, so long as there is an appropriate transition down to adjacent areas with lower intensity.

REGIONAL GROWTH CENTERS
King and Snohomish Counties

Mature:

Bellevue*
Seattle—First Hill/Capitol Hill*

Emerging:

Everett
Kent
Redmond*
Renton
Seattle—University District*
Seattle—Uptown/Queen Anne*

Potential:

Auburn
Bothell Canyon Park
Burien
Federal Way
Lynnwood
SeaTac
Seattle—Northgate*
Seattle—South Lake Union
Totem Lake*

Note: The “model code” effort will focus upon centers indicated by asterisks

Expanded Outline

Urban Centers Model Code

Draft 2/10/2005

I. Types of Districts within a Center

A. Predominantly Commercial

(retail or office over retail, with residential (inc. hotels) sometimes present)

B. Predominantly Residential

(largely residential that is over, or along with, retail / services)

II. Types of Streets: Blockfronts

A. Active Streets

(shops, services, and lobbies)

B. Serene Streets

(gardens, forecourts, entrances, stoops, and steps)

C. Service Streets

(access, parking, and loading, but relatively few other uses)

D. Successional Streets

(service streets transitioning to A or B)

III. Allowable Development Intensity

A. Floor Area Ratio Method

1. Non-Residential Development
2. Residential Development
3. Combined

B. “Cumulative” FAR

1. Base FAR
 - a. Non-residential
 - b. Residential
2. Bonuses from Desired Features
3. Maximum FAR with Bonuses

C. Desired Features (candidates)

1. Public spaces (squares, greens, plazas)
2. Pedestrian Connections (mid-block passageways)
3. Continuous Canopies over Sidewalks
4. Below-Market Residential
5. Structured / Underground Parking
6. Child Care
7. Public Restrooms

IV. Building Heights

- A. Differentiation by District
- B. Less height at edges, where adjacent uses are lower

V. Parking: “Location-Efficient Standards”

- A. Lower minimum requirements, perhaps even eliminating for residential, especially near transit stops/stations.
- B. Use maximum ratios
- C. Reductions for shared parking
- D. Allow off-site parking
- E. Allow commercial use of unused / “excess” parking

VI. Uses

- A. Eliminate lists of permitted and conditional uses
- B. Specify a “short list” of prohibited uses

VII. SEPA Review

- A. Exemptions as allowed by State law
- B. Enact currently allowed waiver for mixed-use buildings

